

The Trysting Tree

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Once upon a time, Oregon State University was home to a humble Gray Poplar tree. Its outstretched arms, decorated by spring blossoms, became a meeting spot for young lovers over a century ago. This was much to the chagrin of the administration of then Oregon Agricultural College, who tried to put an end to these romantic meetings. This only emboldened the students, who named it the “Trysting Tree” in 1901. This story is such an integral part of OSU’s history today that it’s posted on the walls of the Trysting Tree Lounge in the Memorial Union, near a statue made in the tree’s honor. And yet, most students now are not familiar with the story of our university’s oldest friend.

When my dad started college in the 80’s, he lived alongside the Trysting Tree in its final years. Under its watch, he waited for his high school sweetheart, two years his

junior, to follow him. This was a challenge without cell phones or email, but he finally found relief when she arrived. She requested the dorm above his, and for a small snippet of their youth, its worn out walls framed their story. It was no one's first choice, Weatherford Hall, old and rundown as it was, but it was theirs. It became the place where their love took root in the rich soil of OSU... and they loved it.



My parents, Ron and Connie, in Weatherford Hall

It's amazing, the romance, the memories that can be bound to such a small space within the littlest moments of time. The two of them have countless stories. If you ask them, they'll tell you about how they ran an intercom wire through the floor where the steam pipes passed between their rooms. With the press of a button, they could chat with each other anytime. On Valentine's Day one year, she got a call from him telling her to look out her window. My dad had attached a Nestle white chocolate bar to a silver balloon with ribbons and a note and floated it up to her window. Since then,

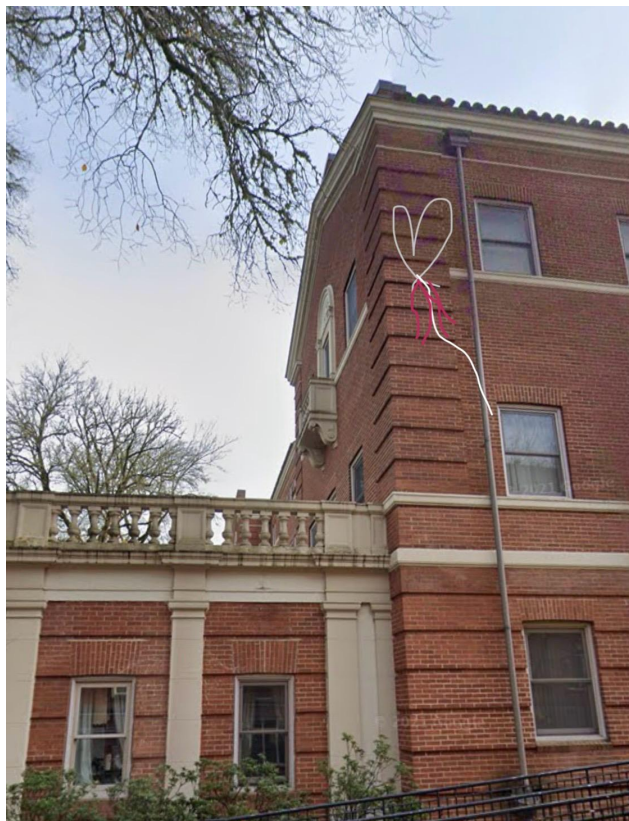
she's kept those items in a scrapbook that she'll proudly show off to anyone who will sit and listen.



The candy wrapper, ribbons, and note

Another time, they dressed up as pirates for a Halloween party because my dad had lost some of his teeth in a recent bike accident. In their photos, he has the biggest smile you would ever see despite the huge gap in it. On late nights, they would often order a Woodstocks pizza with double shrimp. Even now, 40 years later, my dad will suggest that they order a "Woodstocks with double shrimp" when hunger strikes him late at night. This is despite the fact that they now live 600 miles away from the restaurant.

And then there were the dances. On one eventful occasion, they attended the “Suitcase Dance” where there would be a raffle, sending the winners on a vacation to the beach at a later date. They were the last to arrive and, thinking you were meant to show up to the dance *with* suitcases packed and ready to go, they entered with their bags. They got a few funny looks and knew something was wrong when nobody else brought their suitcases. None of that mattered because they won the raffle and got to enjoy their trip, even though their suitcases didn’t get much use that night.



My parents' dorm windows

Amidst tales of mischief, football games, and friends, their love story shines through the years. And with it, one of their most vivid memories was the beauty of

campus as it bloomed in the Spring. Yet, they never did find themselves under the Trysting Tree.



They say the Trysting Tree was likely already present before Oregon Agricultural College acquired the land. This is because Gray Poplars are not desirable trees for landscaping; nobody would choose to add it. They have relatively short lifespans—not far off from that of a human—and nothing particularly special about their appearance. Despite this, Oregon State University embraced the tree with unerring loyalty and love, making it a vital part of the school’s history. I believe it does the same thing with people.

After they had both graduated, my parents got married and chose to stay in Corvallis. It was full of fond memories of their still-recent youth, wrapped in the haze of romance. And so they stayed for thirty years, raising four kids in that unchanging place.

Their youngest daughter never expected to become a part of OSU’s landscape, just like the tree that found itself there merely by chance. A sudden job change caused them to move the family to a suburb near San Francisco, and though it was heartrending for each one of them, they came to embrace the change. Corvallis was a closed chapter—it would feel wrong to return, like taking a step backwards. So, their daughter did everything she could to keep looking forward. After two years at another university in Oregon, though, OSU called her home.

That daughter was me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t deny that my connection to Corvallis lived on. It lived on in the friends I had grown up alongside, who

I often drove to see on weekends. It survived in the memories of my parents and their countless days spent there. And soon, it became intertwined in a love of its own, a boy with a perfect smile and soft brown eyes. The roots of OSU were entangling themselves with my family once more. That's how I ended up here, in a classroom with a window that looks out upon Weatherford Hall.

I walk there, sometimes. I gaze up at the two windows where my parents' stories flourished. I feel the chilling rain fall on my face and think about how it fell on them, too. My mom joined me on one of these walks last Spring.

"It's just like when we were here," she said. "The crowds, bicyclists dodging around you. And look," she stopped, pointing upwards. "Those were our windows. That's where he passed the balloon to me on Valentine's Day."

I could see the nostalgia and the years of memories shining in her eyes. I wanted to cry, thinking of the years between now and then, the meaning this place holds for her.

During a recent walk, I saw a couple doing a romantic photoshoot, peeking around the ivory pillars holding up Weatherford's arch. Those pillars uphold a future unknown and a history of hopeful students, weaving their way through love, studies, and a lifetime of plans.



The Trysting Tree fell shortly before my parents graduated, when the disease in its limbs became too much for it to bear. A cutting was taken from it and grows not far from where the original stood. Its ending followed a century of its beloved presence on

campus, where it witnessed the wonderment of youth and the love stories of those who took refuge beneath it.

My parents' story is written into the history of OSU alongside the Trysting Tree. This is where they fell deeper into love than they ever knew they could. It's where they learned the skills they would need to care for their family one day. Here, their children have thrived and found love of their own. And upon their wall in California hangs their diplomas, framed next to a painting of Weatherford Hall.

OSU is the ground we take root in, our home, and its students spend their lifetimes carrying its legacy. Some may feel sad that the original Trysting Tree is gone, but it lives on in those who have walked where it once spread its branches. OSU draws in the most unlikely guests, the Gray Poplars and the wandering souls, and invites them to stay. Then, it becomes a part of their story.



“Long may'st thou live, thou worthy friend
Thou dear old Trysting Tree
Long may thy branches proudly wave
Majestic'ly and free
To mind us of those happy days
Spent at old O. A. C.”

[The Trysting Tree, 1908](#)

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